

Qualitatively different ways of experiencing student self-assessment

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In the literature, student self-assessment as a practice and as a goal in higher education is generally emphasized for academics. This paper reports a study that investigates what academics emphasize in their experiences of student self-assessment. The investigation focused on the different ways academics described their understanding and practise of self-assessment. A phenomenographic approach was used to research and identify a set of progressive variations of academics' ways of experiencing student self-assessment. Altogether, 16 academics from a variety of disciplines and programs of study in three Australian universities participated in the investigation. The consequent research findings describe five qualitatively different conceptions that depict how academics understand and use student self-assessment. These findings are subsequently discussed in terms of the potential for academics to understand and use student self-assessment to enhance students' self-assessment ability, to further students' lifelong learning and to empower, rather than discipline, students.

Keywords: conceptions of teaching and assessment; lifelong learning; phenomenography; power; self-assessment

Introduction

In the literature, many have emphasized the general importance of student self-assessment in higher education. It has been argued that self-assessment should be a continuing focus throughout undergraduate education (Burgess et al., 1999) and a main goal of higher education (Sluijmans, Dochy & Moerkerke, 1998). The development of self-assessment ability is recognized as a distinct outcome of higher education (Dearing, 1997; Stefani, 1998) and a critical educational tool for learning beyond university education (Taras, 2001).

Brew (1995) traces some of the earliest reported work on student self-assessment back to the 1930s, although most of the early work then focused primarily on comparisons between students' and teachers' grades. However, there has been significantly greater interest in the notion of involving students in assessment in the past 15 years. Falchikov (2005) reports that papers on student involvement in assessment in the 1990s exceed the total number of entries from the preceding four decades (1950–1989). Whilst the earliest reports of student self-assessment in the 1950s focused primarily on student–teacher mark agreement, studies in the past 15 years have reported a wide range of reasons for using student self-assessment.

However, there seems to be confusing and conflicting notions of what is labelled and known as self-assessment. Boud and Brew (1995) observe that 'there are a number of common practices which are sometimes referred to as self-assessment, but which are sufficiently different to warrant separate considerations and the use of alternative descriptors' (p. 130). Likewise, Boud (1995)

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observes that 'The range of activities which take place under the heading of self-assessment goes from the highly technical and subject-based to the expressive and transformative. The one thing these activities share is the emphasis they place on learners making decisions about their own learning' (p. 214).

Student self-assessment is defined in this paper as 'the involvement of students in making judgements of their learning'. Methods which indicate student involvement in judging their learning range from group discussions and poster presentations (Butcher & Stefani, 1995), true and false self-testing assessment (Khan, Davies & Gupta, 2001) and the use of self-assessment diaries (Fazey, 1993). Likewise, descriptions of practices such as collaborative assessment (Rainsbury & Hodges, 1998), co-assessment (Dochy & Segers, 1999), self-determined assessment (Baum & Baum, 1986), negotiated assessment (Gosling, 2000) and self-evaluation (Sullivan & Hall, 1997) indicate a degree of student involvement in judging their learning. Hence, whilst there is a clarion call that student self-assessment should be emphasized, it is uncertain that academics would understand and practise student self-assessment in consistent ways. This study seeks to investigate the different ways that student self-assessment is understood and used by academics.

Student self-assessment and power

Yet another impetus for this study arises from the longstanding assumption that greater student involvement in assessment translates directly into greater student empowerment. In this regard, reducing the teacher's power over students is a basis for the practice of student self-assessment (Boud, 1995; Butcher & Stefani, 1995; Rainsbury & Hodges, 1998; Stefani, 1998). In the past few years, some have questioned the assumption that self-assessment practices will automatically empower students in the assessment process (Tan, 2004). Taras (2001) argues that the real control of power is not challenged if students are excluded from summative graded assessment. However, student participation in grading their work may not necessarily mean that students are empowered. Race (1995) points out that if students know that tutors will intervene if they think that the marking process is unsatisfactory, then summative self-assessment cannot be claimed to be participative nor empowering. These researchers argue that student self-assessment does not guarantee that students are empowered in the assessment process.

Part of this argument lies in the caveat that the ability of self-assessment to empower students also depends on how it is understood and used. Burgess et al. (1999) observe that the way self-assessment is used determines whether it is empowering for the students rather than a process that is imposed by academic staff. Reynolds and Trehan (2000) even warn of participative approaches to assessment being experienced by students as a more subtle technique for disciplining them. They contend that for participative assessment, such as self-assessment, to 'realize in practice what it promises in principle, therefore, it is important to be alert to the tendencies for hierarchical relation to persist' (p. 273). Hence, understanding the different ways that student self-assessment is understood and used by academics may also reveal the different ways that students are empowered or disciplined in self-assessment practices.

This paper reports the findings of a study that examines the qualitative differences among academics' experiences of student self-assessment. The investigation focused on the different ways that student self-assessment was experienced by 16 academics from a variety of disciplines and programmes of study. The consequent research findings describe five qualitatively different conceptions that depict how academics understand and use student self-assessment.

Methodology

The investigation utilized a phenomenographic approach to identify qualitatively different ways that academics experienced student self-assessment. The basic principle of phenomenography is that any phenomenon being investigated is experienced in a limited number of qualitatively different ways (Marton, 1996). Marton and Booth (1997) describe the basis of phenomenography as ‘an interest in describing phenomena in the world as others see them, and in revealing and describing the variation therein, especially in an educational context’ (p. 111). A conception of student self-assessment represents a particular way that individuals constitute meaning by relating to student self-assessment.

Sixteen academics from three metropolitan universities in Australia were interviewed on their experiences of providing student self-assessment practice. This number is consistent with the recommended sample size of 10–15 interview transcripts that can be analysed at any one time (Trigwell, 2000; Trigwell, Prosser & Taylor, 1994). Altogether, 12 different disciplines were represented.

The primary question that underpinned the interviews was ‘What was important to each academic in his or her experience of student self-assessment?’ During interviews, the intention was to understand what the interviewees emphasized as being important in their *individual* experiences. In contrast, the analysis of the transcripts focused on the *collective* awareness of the 16 academics as a group. Eventually, a set of five conceptions was identified as a nested hierarchy of inclusive meanings. These five conceptions formed a coherent set of qualitatively different ways of experiencing student self-assessment.

Results

In this paper, I describe the conceptions of student self-assessment as a dialectic of meaning and practise. The meaning of student self-assessment in each conception is described in terms of how student self-assessment is understood and the essential purpose of each set of student self-assessment practices. The accompanying practices are described below in three phases – before, during and after the students had made their judgements of their learning.

- Pre-judgement: Before the students are involved in judging their learning.
- Judgement: The act of involving students in judging aspects of their learning.
- Post-judgement: After the students’ involvement in judging aspects of their learning.

Structuring the actions by the academic and the students into the pre-judgement, judgement and post-judgement phase provides an extended insight into the series of actions and accompanying meanings that constitute each conception of student self-assessment.

The five conceptions of student self-assessment may be summarized as follows:

Conception A: involving students in judging their behaviour in self-assessment activities

This arises from understanding student self-assessment as the compliance of students’ behaviour in self-assessment activities. Academics involve students in self-assessment by communicating and enforcing behavioural norms through discrete self-assessment activities.

Conception B: involving students in judging their knowledge in self-assessment practices

This arises from understanding student self-assessment as allowing students to make contingent judgements of their knowledge in self-assessment activities. Academics permit students to make some judgements and suggestions in self-assessment activities prior to unilateral assessment.

Conception C: involving students in judging their standards within the programme of study

This arises from understanding student self-assessment as giving feedback on students' standards in the programme of study. The academics use students' judgements of their learning to give feedback of their deficient understanding of requisite standards in the programme of study.

Conception D: involving students in judging their proficiency within the programme of study

This arises from understanding student self-assessment as the development of students' proficiency in the programme of study. Students are persuaded and assisted to monitor their own progress in the programme of study.

Conception E: involving students in judging their self-assessment ability beyond the programme of study

This arises from understanding student self-assessment as the sustainability of students' self-assessment ability within and beyond the programme of study. Academics mandate that students have to self-appraise their ability and develop their capacity for self-judgement.

Table 1 summarizes each conception of student self-assessment in terms of its chronology of judgements and its accompanying purpose for such judgements.

Conception A: involving students in judging their behaviour in self-assessment activities

In conception A, academics experience student self-assessment in terms of ensuring students' behavioural compliance. The academics' awareness of student self-assessment focuses on correcting students' behaviour in and through self-assessment activities.

This way of experiencing student self-assessment focuses on ensuring that students are behaviourally compliant. Academics provide the students with opportunities to judge if their behaviour complies with his or her expectations. The academics constitute behavioural norms for students to judge their behaviour against, in self-assessment activities. Notions of correct and acceptable behaviour function as the object of students' self-judgements. The same notions are utilized by the academics when judging the correctness of students' self-judgements. Academics' notions of acceptable behaviour therefore act as the object of judgement for both students and academics in self-assessment activity.

Pre-judgement

The academic emphasizes to her students her behavioural expectations. Before students are involved in making judgements of their learning behaviour, the academic begins by describing to her students their responsibility for any errors they might make in professional practice. Students' involvement in judging their learning focuses on their behaviour. Students have the consequences of making errors impressed upon them. The emphasis is on students being careful in order to avoid making errors.

I start by describing, talking about responsibility. I give them some examples of errors in dispensing that could have been avoided if the individual concerned had looked at what they were doing. (Female lecturer, Pharmacy)

Students make judgements of their behaviour in terms of examining whether their behaviour merits their self-awarded mark. For example, the academic desires the students to judge their behaviour in the form of participation or attendance at seminars against their self-awarded mark.

Table 1. Academics' purposes and practices of student self-assessment.

Conceptions	Practice of student self-assessment (SSA)			Purpose of student self-assessment
	Pre-judgement	Judgement	Post-judgement	
A Involving students in judging their behaviour in self-assessment activities	<p><i>SSA is understood as ensuring compliance of students' behaviour in self-assessment activities.</i></p> <p>Academic communicates behavioural expectations.</p>	<p>Students involved in judgements of their behaviour.</p>	<p>Students' judgements checked for compliance with norms.</p>	<p>Students are self-conscious about behavioural norms in a programme.</p>
B Involving students in judging their knowledge in self-assessment activities	<p><i>SSA is understood as allowing students' contingent judgements of knowledge in self-assessment activities.</i></p> <p>Academic makes students comfortable with the assessment process.</p>	<p>Students involved in formative judgements and suggestions for assessment process.</p>	<p>Academics unilaterally assess students' work based on students' suggestions for assessment criteria.</p>	<p>Students can have a general sense of well-being about being aware of what they have learnt.</p>
C Involving students in judging their standards within the programme of study	<p><i>SSA is understood as giving feedback on students' standards in the programme of study.</i></p> <p>Raise with students the issue of standards in their performance</p>	<p>Students involved in judgements of their performance against academics' standards.</p>	<p>Academic uses the students' reflections as context to provide feedback on students' understanding of standards.</p>	<p>Students can appreciate what are the academic's real standards.</p>

Table 1. (Continued)

Conceptions	Practice of student self-assessment (SSA)			Purpose of student self-assessment
	Pre-judgement	Judgement	Post-judgement	
D	<i>SSA is understood as the development of students' proficiency in the programme of study.</i>			
Involving students in judging their proficiency within the programme of study	Discuss issue of proficiency checks in relation to standards in the programme.	Students involved in judgements of appropriate standards and their relative proficiency in the programme.	Provides more opportunities for students to monitor their progress in the programme.	Students can understand the standards in the programme and, consequently, their proficiency for completing the programme.
E	<i>SSA is understood as the sustainability of students' self-assessment ability within and beyond the programme of study.</i>			
Involving students in judging their self-evaluation capacity beyond the programme of study	Persuades students of the value of judging their own learning.	Students involved in judgements of their learning and professional ability.	Assesses if students have engaged with their learning and self-assessment. Separately evaluates their learning outcome.	Student can self-appraise their proficiency levels and identify areas for continual development beyond the programme.

That being a subject in ethics I want them to critically analyse how they have participated and whether they are worth the mark that they're actually allocating themselves. (Male lecturer, Law)

Judgement

The academic also emphasizes the objective outcomes of student self-assessment. Essentially, she is interested in the behavioural outcomes that the students' judgements of their 'learning' produce. Students need to judge if their self-assessment produces an outcome that is acceptable to the academic. The criteria for judging this outcome are explicit and list driven. Ultimately, students judge their conformity to the academic's acceptable norms of behaviour in their tasks. The outcome, and not the process of arriving at that outcome, is important.

What we're after is that the whole process results in a product that is appropriate. (Female lecturer, Pharmacy)

The critical issue for the academic concerns how students can be involved in judging objective behavioural outcomes. Consequently, the academic makes behaviour the objective and makes it very clear what are acceptable forms of behaviour. Students are then expected to judge if their behaviour has conformed accordingly.

The outcome of the self-assessment is it's either an assessment that is ready to be handed in or not...it's a binary response. It's either yes or no. And essentially it has to get to a yes before they hand it in. (Female lecturer, Pharmacy)

Post-judgement

The academic relies on a mechanism to self-regulate students' judgements of their behaviour. This mechanism, in turn, alerts the academic to instances when the students have made unacceptable judgements of their behaviour. For example, a clear case for the academic to judge the student's self-awarded mark as being incorrect arises when students award themselves the maximum of four participation marks despite having attended only one out of four workshops.

I reserve the right in the reading guide to say that I have the right to change marks. I've had students who have attended one workshop and tried to give themselves four marks. I think that's a little bit rich. So I varied in those cases. (Male lecturer, Law)

Summary

The academic understands, and practises, student self-assessment as a mechanism for involving students in behavioural compliance to their own academic norms. The intention is for students to self-regulate their own learning behaviour. The academics do not seek to recognize students' personal knowledge. The next conception seeks to expand the strategy of student self-assessment to influence student's knowledge in addition to their behaviour.

Conception B: involving students in judging their knowledge in self-assessment activities

In conception B, student self-assessment is experienced as permitting students' tentative judgements of their knowledge in self-assessment activity, which are contingent on being acceptable to the academic. Student self-assessment includes student's behavioural compliance but, essentially, focuses on the regulation of students' knowledge through self-assessment activities. The academics' awareness of student self-assessment is focused on the internal validation of students' knowledge without threatening the academics' prerogative of summative assessment and certification.

There is a tension between the need for students to judge their knowledge and the unsuitability for students to grade their knowledge. This means that students should self-assess their work prior to submission but accept the academic's unilateral assessment to be conclusive of what their work is worth. The students' formative knowledge is constituted for them as an object of judgement in student self-assessment activity.

Consequently, the academic tends to separate students' appreciation of their personal knowledge from the formal accrediting or assessment of that knowledge. The students' appreciation of their personal knowledge is couched in terms of them being partners in a learning environment. This partnership ends when it comes to the formal assessment of their knowledge, which remains as the academic's prerogative. The academic involves students in judging their knowledge by dichotomizing the students' self-validation of their learning from the academic's external assessment or accreditation of the students' learning.

Pre-judgement

The academic begins by making students comfortable with the notion of being involved in the assessment process. He seeks to reassure students that they will be given some power in order to judge their own learning, and this reassurance softens potential student resistance to the academic's eventual judgement of the students' self-assessment outcome.

It's obvious that a student coming into this context is going to see the lecturers as the ones with the power...[T]hat relationship has to be neutralized in some way or re-balanced. And, as soon as you say, 'Right, now I am going to assess you', that's like I'm going to apply a blunt instrument. I'm going to take you apart and assess you in some kind of clinical process. (Male lecturer, Design)

Before students go on to make formative judgements of their knowledge, the academic provides them with basic criteria to subsequently demonstrate their knowledge to him. By insisting that students are not capable of formally assessing their work, the academic may then subsequently persuade the students that their role should be confined to demonstrating, rather than formally assessing, their knowledge.

You see, originally, what I did was say, 'Look you can do it anyway you like.'...That was just too overwhelming for them so I found that I had to structure it and I had to give them at least a level of, well, these are the basic sort of criteria we're looking for. (Male lecturer, Medicine)

Judgement

The students make tentative and preliminary judgements of their work. However, it is the academic who makes the final definite judgements of the students' work. For example, the academic admits that students do not judge or evaluate their work in any formal sense.

Interviewer: 'Do the students go on to judge or evaluate their work against the agreed criteria?'

Academic: 'Not in any formal sense. What happens is partway through the semester the student will come in with their work and we will sit down and go through it: "This level of work is only going to get you a pass grade. If you want a HD you're going to have to take on this level of work."' (Male lecturer, Medicine)

The involvement of students in judging their knowledge is limited to suggesting criteria for the academic to unilaterally assess their knowledge. Ultimately, students do not make judgements of their knowledge in any concrete form. Students may only be involved in suggesting how their knowledge will be unilaterally judged by the academic.

It's fine for you to come in with a folder and say, 'Alright, here's all my stuff.' But how, how do I know that you've actually learnt it? What are you going to use to prove that and what am I going to

assess that against? So they have to give me some form of criteria that I'm going to use. (Male lecturer, Medicine)

Post-judgement

When students are allowed to self-award marks as a numerical indicator of the value of their knowledge, the self-assessed mark is considered as unreliable without being informed by peer and tutor assessment. Ultimately, student's judgements of their knowledge are a useful but incomplete process that requires external (e.g. peer and tutor) validation.

I still think that as an individual one cannot rely on self-assessment. One has to rely on self and peer and mentor. (Male lecturer, Design)

Summary

The academic dichotomizes students' personal knowledge from accredited learning with the intention of allowing students to acquire knowledge with minimal distraction from summative assessment. There is a chasm between what students may judge formatively and what academics should judge summatively. Academics do not involve students in making summative judgements about the standard of their own individual work. In the next conception, the academic seeks to expand the strategy of student self-assessment by making students assess the deficiencies of their performance in order to appreciate the requisite standards to be attained.

Conception C: involving students in judging their standards within the programme of study

In conception C, student self-assessment is experienced by academics as the provision of feedback on students' judgements of the extent to which their work meets requisite standards in the programme of study. Academics focus on the students' judgements of their work in relation to the requisite standards of the programme of study. The requisite standards of the programme are the object of judgement for students' self-assessment.

In terms of how this is manifest in practise, the academics use students' judgements of their performance to reveal the students' sense of standards. The academic involves students in making judgements of the proficiency of their work and this reveals any shortfall in the students' sense of standards.

Pre-judgement

The academic begins by explaining to students how they may understand the derivation of standards in relation to their work. In conception B, the academic is the sole authority in interpreting requisite assessment standards against which to judge students' knowledge. In conception C, the academic allows students to form judgements of the standard of their work. The purpose of self-grading is explained as a means for students and the academic to compare their notions of performance standards.

So they all get this [academic grade descriptors] on the back of their [marked assignments]. So they can get an idea of where they're strong and where they've got to improve. And then they look at that with the one they'd done and they identify areas where there is noticeable difference. (Female lecturer, Design)

Judgement

Students reflect on the overall level of their performance. Their reflections are made explicit in their self-assessment, which serves as a basis for dialogue with the academic on the standard of

their performance. Students therefore judge their standards relative to the academic's. The student's judgement of the performance standards of his or her work is used by the academic to discuss what the academic understands to be requisite standards.

And, as a consequence of their reflections, we ask them to actually put in what they think about their performance before we have done the assessment. So that we are using their understanding of the nature of their performance against our understanding and it gives us an opportunity to establish some dialogue. (Female lecturer, Design)

Post-judgement

After the academic and the student have discussed their relative understanding of the standard of the student's submitted work, the academic uses the student's reflections as a context to provide feedback on the student's judgements of their performances. By making students conscious of judging whether their work is up to scratch, the academic is able to maintain the student's focus on requisite performance standards.

So it's just becoming another mechanism for making them conscious of the implications of their actions and it gives that opportunity to provide feedback that's a little bit more contextualized against their own experience and not just my experience of reading the thing. (Male lecturer, Design)

Summary

The academic uses students' reflections of their performance deficiencies to discuss their understanding of standards. This serves to highlight to the students their performance deficiencies based on their inadequate understanding of standards. It does not seek to allow students to independently set requisite standards in order to appraise their proficiency and progress in a programme. In the next conception, students make judgements about appropriate standards and monitor their proficiency against these standards in order to monitor their progress in the programme of study.

Conception D: involving students in judging their proficiency within the programme of study

In this conception, academics experience student self-assessment in terms of developing students' judgements of their proficiency in the programme of study. Academics' awareness of student self-assessment is focused on assisting students to assume responsibility for their proficiency for progressing in the programme of study. Students are involved in making judgements about what constitutes proficiency in the programme of study. The academic's strategy is to give students the option of evaluating their proficiency, so that students can be responsible for monitoring and attaining progress in their programme of study.

Students' appreciation of standards is considered important for attaining competence and progressing in the programme but students' judgements of their proficiency are only relevant for the completion of the programme. Hence, the notion of adequate proficiency, as defined by the requirements of the programme of study, constitutes the object of students' judgements in self-assessment.

Pre-judgement

The academic begins student self-assessment by persuading students to embrace reflection of their performance as a professional trait. She explains how reflection will improve her students' learning and how they will correspondingly be rewarded in their marks.

I try to motivate them in terms of why they'd be doing this course. Reflecting on your own performance. How does it motivate? If you want to do well at this course? If you want to get a good mark? (Female lecturer, Computer Science)

Judgement process

After the academic has explained the benefits of student self-assessment in the context of completing the programme, students proceed to discuss or negotiate what standards or values their work should be assessed against in their self-assessment. Such involvement and discussion is aimed at providing students with the opportunity to influence what form of work or proficiencies are valued and subsequently given assessment weight. Students, therefore, have the chance to determine the proficiencies and standards to be assessed.

This idea of what constitutes a good piece of work and what are the qualities that make it a good piece of work. They know what those qualities are. And they discuss it constantly. (Female lecturer, Media Studies)

Post-judgement

In conception C, the nature of the dialogue is to emphasize to students the disparity between their understanding of standards and the academic's standards. In conception D, the students' judgements of their proficiency standards are not judged against the academics' standards. Instead, after students have assessed their proficiency, the academic may then discuss with the student any areas of concern that may hinder the student's progress in the programme. The emphasis is on the student's progress in the programme rather than on the student's sense of standards in the programme. One example is the use of concept inventories for students to identify areas requiring further assistance from the academic.

A couple of times during a semester the students do concept inventories where[by] they have a whole lot of concepts that they're supposed to [know]... So they put it in. And then they put next to the things they don't know what they are going to do about it. And the tutor comes around and discusses that with them. (Female lecturer, Computer Science)

Summary

The academic uses students' reflections on appropriate standards and their relative proficiencies against these standards to enhance their progress in the programme. The approach serves to provide students with an option to take greater control of their learning in the programme of study. In the next conception, academics insist that students plan and strive for personally meaningful and professionally imperative learning within and beyond the programme of study.

Conception E: involving students in judging their self-evaluation capacity beyond the programme of study

In this conception, academics experience student self-assessment in terms of sustaining students' self-assessment ability. Academics' awareness of student self-assessment focuses on engaging students in their present and future learning processes beyond the programme of study. Students' capacity to set goals for themselves and reflect on how best to learn is considered as an imperative for students to independently exercise self-assessment in the future.

Hence, the future need for students to make their own judgements concerning their learning is the focus of students' judgements within the programme of study. Academics in this conception construct self-assessment as not just an activity but an ability of students. The academic's overall

strategy is to insist that students develop the capacity for personally meaningful and professionally imperative learning within and beyond the programme of study. The academic involves students in the programme of study in making their own judgements of their learning and professional ability beyond the programme.

Pre-judgement

The academics raise student self-assessment as an ongoing professional and educational issue. They begin by making students engage with the process and literature of self-assessment. For example, one academic links for students their self-assessment in the programme to their profession. Students learn about their own processes of learning, as well as the implications of self-assessment for their future professional practice.

And I do deliberately for the students link the process of self-assessment in their educational setting with the process of self-assessment that's going to be essential in their professional practice. They learn an awful lot, I think, about their own tendencies, their own sort of constructs in relation to education. (Female lecturer, Nursing)

Judgement process

As students begin to think about their learning and assessment processes in the programme, they may suggest to the academic various assessment models they are considering for their own self-assessment practice. The academic's response is to prompt them to think further about the merits of their suggestions. She helps the students to self-assess their intended self-assessment strategies.

I see myself as providing....responses to their suggestions that make them think laterally. You know, maybe one of the things they might want to think about is having their peers assess their presentations for them to see whether they would agree. So that they think about things before they come up with a definite idea. (Female lecturer, Dentistry)

Post-judgement

Student self-assessment to the academic emphasizes the process of engagement over the measurement of products. The academic makes a careful distinction between ensuring, but not judging, the students' engagements in their self-assessment of learning and the students' learning outcomes, as assessed and judged.

Basically, I will accept anything from the students that have evidence that they have engaged with the process. I encourage students to make it their own. And I try to restrict my judgements to 'Have they engaged in self-assessment?' I am not judging the quality of self-assessment. (Male lecturer, Adult Education)

Summary

The academic makes his students plan and strive for personally meaningful and professionally imperative learning within and beyond the programme of study. Student self-assessment serves to engage students with their own pedagogies of learning to take responsibility for their professional practise and development. In the previous conception, academics seek to assist students to progress within the programme by enhancing the students' judgements of their learning and progress in relation to existing assessment practices. In contrast, academics who involve their students in judging their self-evaluation capacity seek to prepare students for learning and development beyond the programme of study by enhancing the students' capacity for exercising self-assessment in future professional contexts beyond the programme of study.

Discussion

In phenomenography, it has been suggested that greater awareness of more aspects of a phenomenon may be regarded as more advanced ways of understanding and using that phenomenon. A more advanced way of experiencing student self-assessment may imply 'more complex and more inclusive (or more specific) than less advanced ways of experiencing the same thing' (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 107). The five conceptions in this study may offer a new way of understanding how student self-assessment practices may enhance student self-assessment ability, enhance their learning beyond the programme of study, and how academics may empower rather than discipline students through student self-assessment practices.

How student self-assessment may enhance self-assessment ability

Practices in higher education that advocate students assuming more participation and responsibility for their learning place a premium on students being able to plan and conduct their learning independently of the teacher. A large part of such independence involves students being able to judge the extent of their learning without the direct assistance of the teacher. Sustainable assessment can be understood as 'assessment that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future learning needs' (Boud, 2000). Perhaps the most critical need for students to meet their own future learning needs is their capacity to judge what their own learning needs are and how they can go about meeting these needs. Self-assessment ability is, therefore, a critical ingredient for students' lifelong learning. The research findings of this study suggest that the involvement of students in judging their self-evaluation capacity beyond the programme of study is a critical ingredient for enhancing students' consequent capacity for lifelong learning.

How student self-assessment may enhance lifelong learning

Student self-assessment is also identified closely with effective formative assessment or assessment practices that emphasize the enhancement of learning. Both Sadler (1998) and Black and William (1998) emphasize the need for formative assessment to involve students in generating and understanding feedback that explains the gap between the state revealed by feedback and the desired state. Student self-assessment plays the critical role of ensuring that feedback given in formative assessment is not unduly dominated by the teachers' views. However, the potential of student self-assessment to enhance the quality of formative assessment also depends on the specific ways that academics understand and use student self-assessment in each context.

Amongst the five conceptions of student self-assessment identified in this study, only conception E described a meaning and consequent practice of student self-assessment that focused on enhancing students' learning beyond the programme of study. It is suggested that formative assessment and/or self-assessment practice with a primary focus on student behaviour (conception A), assessment practices (conception B), standards of the programme of study (conception C) or requisite proficiency for completing the programme of study (conception D) is limited in assisting students' learning beyond the programme of study and beyond university education.

How student self-assessment may empower rather than discipline students

In the past few years, some researchers have questioned whether self-assessment practices will automatically empower students in assessment (Race, 1995; Reynolds & Trehan, 2000; Tan, 2004). These researchers argue that the potential of student self-assessment to empower students for learning depends on how it is understood and used by academics and students. The findings

of this study offer insights into the qualitatively different ways that academics may understand and use power in their student self-assessment practices.

In conceptions A and B, the focus of the academics would appear to be on retaining and exercising their sovereign power over students in terms of regulating students' behaviour and formal assessment practices, respectively. In conceptions C and D, the focus on the standards and requisite proficiency of the programme of study emphasizes the academic as an agent or a proxy of the epistemological power vested in the programme. The programme of study represents a point at which epistemological power is applied on the students (through the academic) and on the academic.

In contrast, I would see conception E as an example of academics using student self-assessment to empower their students beyond their own control (conceptions A and B) and beyond the programme of study (conceptions C and D). There appears to be a greater awareness of dealing more reflexively with issues of power beyond the teacher's sovereign authority and the epistemological boundaries of the programme of study. Academics are also aware of the disciplinary effects of self-assessment practices and attempt to minimize these effects by allowing students some discretion in the types of self-judgements they may elect to show the academic.

Conclusion

Much of the literature on student self-assessment is described from the perspectives of those who stand outside its experience. For example, researchers who assert that student-teacher mark agreement should be the critical outcome of self-assessment, de-emphasize how the process and its outcomes are experienced by the academics and their students.

There are examples of personal accounts of academics' experiences of student self-assessment. For example, Cowan (1988) and Roach (1999) describe their personal experiences of student self-assessment. Their accounts provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon *in* a particular set of contexts.

This investigation adds to the literature on student self-assessment by providing rich, grounded descriptions of the phenomenon *across* a range of contexts. The diversity of disciplines and methods represented by the 16 participants construct a good range of variation of academics' general awareness of contexts and issues in higher education. They are relevant for indicating how academics may evaluate their meanings and practices of student self-assessment against the qualitatively different experiences of the 16 participants in this investigation. Further research on the variation of students' ways of experiencing student self-assessment would provide another reference point for academics to evaluate their views of student self-assessment.

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